

Corps adjusts Missouri River releases to Aid Fish Spawn

OMAHA - The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers is adjusting releases from the big dams on the Missouri River in Montana, North Dakota and South Dakota during the last week in April to help provide steady reservoir levels for spawning game and forage fish.

"As we announced in our annual operating plan in March, our goal this year is to provide steady to rising levels in each of the big reservoirs during the spring fish spawn," said Brigadier General William Grisoli, Northwestern Division Engineer. "We were able to hold Lake Oahe steady in April and will strive to hold Lake Sakakawea steady in May and Fort Peck Lake in June."

Walleye and rainbow smelt spawn in Oahe in early April through early May and spawn in Sakakawea in late April through May. The spawn of forage fish in Fort Peck (cisco) generally occurs in late fall and they hatch over the winter and into early spring. Minnow species also provide forage and they generally finish spawning in June. Walleye there are hatchery raised.

The new Missouri River Master Manual was announced last month. It contains new, more stringent drought conservation measures that keep more water in the reservoirs during drought. These measures include reducing navigation flows and season length more during drought as well as halting navigation sooner than under the previous plan.

The operating plan for 2004 calls for minimum flows for navigation and shortening the season length by at least 36 days and as much as 53 days if dry conditions persist. Also, the Corps is striving to provide steady to rising reservoir levels to help the fish spawn. However, this is very difficult to accomplish in drought years. Therefore, the Corps plans to rotate the priority given to the upper three reservoirs each year in a drought. Although this year the priority is at Lake Sakakawea, the Corps will strive to keep all three reservoirs steady during their respective fish spawns. The success of the Corps' efforts will depend on the magnitude and timing of the actual runoff.

To help keep more water in the reservoirs, releases from Gavins Point Dam have been maintained at minimum water supply, water quality and navigation levels this month. The navigation industry said early this year that they would not be using the river above Nebraska City, Neb., in April. Therefore, releases to meet flow targets at Sioux City, Iowa, and Omaha were not provided this month. Also, additional releases are being made from reservoirs on the Kansas River to further limit releases from the upstream dams.

Releases from Fort Peck have been increased to 11,000 cubic feet per second (cfs) to move water into Sakakawea and Oahe. They will not exceed that level

through May. Releases from Garrison Dam have been reduced to the 14,000 to 16,000 cfs range in an attempt to keep a steady level at Sakakawea. They are expected to remain in that range all month. Given current runoff, these reductions will most likely cause Oahe to fall 1.5 to 2 feet during May.

Gavins Point releases will be increased on May 1 as the least terns and piping plovers move onto their nesting grounds. Steady releases will be provided during the nesting season to ensure adequate flows to meet minimum downstream targets while minimizing the potential for flooding nests. The birds generally begin their annual migration south in mid-August.

"Drought persists throughout much of the upper Midwest," said Brig. Gen. Grisoli. "The mountain snowpack was very disappointing, peaking at only 78 per cent, which means it may be a difficult summer for users of Missouri River water," he added.